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ABSTRACT

An overview is provided of the benefits and problems associated with using faculty members with classroom teaching duties as volunteers in college-sponsored writing centers outside the classroom environment. First, benefits for the school administration, the students, and the volunteer faculty tutors are outlined. These benefits include the following: (1) the school does not have to pay extra salaries for teachers working as writing center volunteers, nor does it need to recruit volunteers from outside sources; (2) seeing the faculty member in a different role may be beneficial to the student; and (3) tutoring in the center offers the faculty member an opportunity to work in an informal setting, free of classroom structure and restrictions, and to change his/her perspective on students. The next sections outline problems associated with such programs, focusing on administrative concerns, which are primarily related to defining the "mission" or goal of the center, and providing financial support for the center's activities; problems with recruiting and screening faculty tutors; difficulties associated with tutor training; scheduling conflicts; and problems with unsatisfactory tutor performance and accountability. Finally, suggested solutions are offered, including organizational and administrative guidelines; and recommendations for staff recruitment, orientation training, refresher sessions, ongoing tutor training, and recognition. (EJV)

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DO VOLUNTEERS WORK?

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DO VOLUNTEERS WORK?

For this presentation, a writing center is defined as a specific location outside the classroom environment where students from the sponsoring educational institution (elementary, secondary or postsecondary) learn to think and write with help from tutors. Methods for staffing these centers vary; they may employ peer tutors, graduate students, experts from the community, or faculty from the sponsoring institution. These tutors may be paid or they may be volunteer (no monetary reward). This paper will focus on one type of volunteer, the faculty member who also has classroom teaching duties. It will discuss the benefits and problems that arise when this particular type of volunteer is used, and will offer some possible solutions to the problems.

BENEFITS

For the School Administration

The most obvious administrative advantage is that the school does not have to pay extra salaries for teachers working as writing center tutors; neither does it have to recruit volunteers from outside sources because it uses employees whose qualifications have already been established.

If the writing center is staffed by faculty volunteers from all areas, it can assist goals in all disciplines by integration of writing (writing is learning) into the total curriculum; this distributes the "burden" of teaching written communication more equally. In addition, a lesser amount of tutor training is necessary because faculty tutors already have expertise and teaching experience.

The administration also benefits because the center often acts as a supporting referral system for students with special problems that may have escaped diagnosis in regular testing. Tutors with less teaching experience might not detect such problems. Another advantage is that faculty tutors can use the center as a proving ground for new materials and teaching methods which can be utilized as part of the institutional curriculum.

Last, involvement in a successful writing center sponsored by the school could increase faculty morale and institutional pride.

For the Student

Seeing the faculty memeber in a different role may be beneficial for the student. Students may develop trust, respect, and sometimes a close friendship when a teacher formerly viewed only as an authority figure becomes a learning partner. Use of faculty tutors also exposes students to more educated people with varied interests, experiences, writing methods, and levels of thought. The exposure and learning partner situation in the center should help overcome students' reluctance, fear, or inability to learn with other faculty in classroom situations.

For the Volunteer Faculty Tutor

For the faculty member, tutoring in the center offers an informal setting, free of classroom structure and restrictions. It develops tutoring skills (many classroom teachers, particularly at college level, have no idea how to function on a one-to-one basis).

Working with individuals in this setting can change the tutors' perspective of students; classroom students who are merely subjects for theoretical studies become real human beings with a variety of writing styles, learning abilities, and a vast span of cultural and academic influences.

This new awareness may enable a teacher to reach formerly unreachable students (relucant, slow, foreign, academically disadvantaged), and determine the needs of those students. The center also provides tutors an opportunity to refer students with suspected special problems to appropriate programs: developmental education; English as a second language; handicapped services; academic, financial or personal counseling. Making these discoveries may further the faculty tutor's desire to promote learning; it certainly offers the reward of sharing in the experience of student progress.

Faculty tutoring also offers the opportunity for professional growth. The service in the center can be added to the tutor's resume and will help upgrade her personnel record.

Center tutoring can broaden the tutor's knowledge of her peers' world also. It may stimulate interest in other disciplines and expose the faculty tutor to writing assignments given by other instructors; thus, the faculty tutor can learn new content, style, and viewpoints. Sharing information in and about the center learners helps the tutor learn new approaches to teaching writing within her own discipline; it also exposes the tutor and students. This association and interaction with other faculty tutors can lead to respect as well as increased knowledge.

PROBLEMS

Problems with Administration

Administrative problems are primarily of two types: defining the "mission" or goal of the center and providing financial support in the form of a physical setting, equipment and materials, clerical assistance, and a full-time director. Often there is vacillation from the administration, especially at the onset of a writing center project: The project "sounds" good, but there is no money to fund it. This lack of commitment can spell the death of a writing center, especially when it depends on volunteers who sense that their administration does not value their contribution.

A problem even greater than lack of financial support, however, is in defining the goals and philosophy of the center. The administration needs to determine the appropriate clientele for the center. Without a clearly stated purpose, the writing center often becomes a "dumping ground" for all students that instructors don't know what to do with or don't want to try. These include students with learning disabilities, lack of good study skills, English as a second language problems, or physical handicaps, as well as students who are illiterate. The writing center, if it is to be successful, must have a clear idea of who it is to help and in what way. The center must have the administation's backing when it refers non-writing center problems to other departments.

The administration must determine whether the writing center is to provide assistance to students only or to other personnel in the institution as well. Because of the expertise of the faculty tutors, there exists the danger of professional imposition. The tutor is placed in an awkward position when a peer or administrative supervisor, a dean for example, "drops off" a report, an article being prepared for publication, or even a dissertation for the faculty tutor to edit. The administration must decide whether professional editing is within the scope of the center's purpose.

Another problem arises when the community at large comes to the center for assistance. It is one thing to help a community member fashion a letter of complaint to a manufacturer for poor merchandise, but it is quite another when, for example, the center is sought out by public school teachers preparing for the TECAT or a businessman who wants help designing his sales brochure.

Administration must determine the focus of the center and then adhere to that focus so that the faculty tutor is utilized most effectively to meet the institution's goals.

Problems with Recruiting Faculty Tutors

Two problems exist in getting faculty involved in the center: one is getting volunteers in the first place, and the other is screening the volunteers so that only the right "write" tutors are selected. Most faculty are overworked, yet underpaid and underpraised as it is, so if a faculty member volunteers to help the center, by all means she should be used in some capacity, even if she would not be an effective tutor. The faculty who are to be used as tutors must not only be competent, but also patient, compassionate, and truly committed to students' growth as writers. Possessing the right/write attitude is perhaps the single most important characteristic of the effective writing tutor. Those who do not have this attitude, regardless of their good intentions, can do more harm than good and should be assigned elsewhere.

Problems with Training Faculty Tutors

Faculty, especially if they are English faculty, may be particularly resistant to training efforts. They may feel they need no training to tutor writing by virtue of their academic and instructional experience. It is imperative, though, that they receive such training. Faculty must be made aware that tutoring is very much different from most classroom experience. An orientation to tutoring methods will often be helpful, too, in curbing their tendancy to correct, edit, and lecture rather than coach, coax, and draw out. An orientation may be needed to ensure that the necessary paperwork is completed for the writing center's records. Faculty training also needs to cover how to respond to a student's complaint about another faculty member, how to "wean" an overly dependent student, or how to deal with the often contrary attitudes of referring faculty.

Problems with Utilizing Faculty Tutors

An initial problem in utilizing faculty in the writing center is one of scheduling center hours around their other responsibilities. After a schedule has been established, however, an even greater problem is in having the faculty tutor maintain that schedule. Because they are volunteering their time, it may be awkward

for the writing center director to insist that the faculty tutors be punctual and reliable, but this consistency is crucial to an effective center. Once the initial "glow" of volunteerism begins to fade, which is about the same time as the semester work begins to get heavier, there may be the problem of maintaining faculty commitment. (This is an area in which administrative recognition can be especially helpful. More on that later.)

A different problem, and one which would require immediate attention, is "redirecting" faculty volunteers who are unsatisfactory as tutors. These faculty should be given other assignments which make better use of their time and talents.

One last problem regarding using faculty in the writing center is the issue of accountability. It must be made clear from the onset what the relationship of the faculty tutor is to the center director and to any other staff members such as student peer tutors.

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Administrative Responsibilities

Along with funding a permanently-located, well-equipped center, a major responsibility of the administration should be to make the writing center and its volunteer system an official, legitimate part of the total institution. Another important step would be to design an organizational structure with a support system for the staff that implements and operates the writing center.

Ideally, an advisory board should be created, with representatives from all areas of school: teachers, counselors, parents (elementary), plus possible representatives from the business community (secondary and postsecondary). This board, with help from the center director and in accord with the institutional mission, would formulate the philosophy of the writing center, evaluate its progress, make recommendations for materials and equipment, and furnish moral support to the director and staff.

To determine the center philosophy, the head administrator (or representative of the head adminstrator) of the school should work with the writing center director and the advisory board. Ideally, centers are not remedial labs, but places to help students develop skills in the writing process: thinking, organizing, writing and revising. Discussion, diagnosis, discussion, writing, rewriting, and more discussion should be the center's main activities.

In addition to the philosophy, the administrator, director and advisory board should determine the scope of the center. Should it accept essays only? Research papers? Technical reports? Business letters? Resumes? Articles for publication?

Along with the philosophy and scope, the clientele should be designated before the center opens. Sould the center cater to English students only? Students from all disciplines? Foreign students? Developmental students? All students of the institution? Faculty writing professional papers? People from the community?

To avoid later confusion for faculty tutors and all others concerned, the philosophy, scope and clientele should be clearly defined and presented in written form to the total institution. Referral to these written guidelines can help alleviate many problems when the center is in full operation.

One of the first priorities for the advisory board and/or the chief administrator (principal, dean or vice-president) should be to design and establish an organizational hiearchy, and adhere to it. At the top of the writing center administration should be the institutional administrator, then a full-time paid writing center director, who has no other duties. The administrator/board should furnish a job description for the director, then collaborate with the director to design job descriptions for other writing center staff members.

The job description for the director should state that she is responsible for the total operation of the center, supported by frequent consultations with the advisory board/institutional administrator. Volunteer faculty tutors should be ranked under the director, who would recruit, train, schedule and evaluate tutors.

In order to serve as effective tutors, volunteer faculty should also be released from some of their teaching duties. Through constant communication, administration should remain cognizant of the center's status.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STAFF RECRUITMENT, TRAINING AND RECOGNITION

Recruitment (How to get the right/write volunteers)

Recruiting volunteer faculty tutors should be the duty of the director with support from the overseeing administrator/board.

Before anyone is recruited, a job description for volunteer tutors should be written. Professional qualifications should be the same as for other tutor job descriptions. Other items that should be included are tutor responsibilities, schedule arrangements (including absence from duties), the volunteer tutor's place in the writing center hierarchy, training requirements, and desired personal characteristics. These personal traits should include commitment to writing center philosophy; a congenial attitude towards students and other faculty; tact, patience, a sense of responsibility, a sense of humor; and a willingness to let students do the writing, to think out their own problems without dogmatic editorial interference.

Faculty from all disciplines who are interested in writing should be recruited as tutors. This might be done in several ways: By the director visiting faculty meetings, by personal invitation, by distributing flyers, by placing notices in school publications and newsletters.

To select the most appropriate volunteers, it would be advantageous to have an application and interview process; a tutor that is well-suited to the position will be most productive, and the application/interview process is an effective screening device.

When recruiting, it would be helpful to let recruits know they will be supported by other staff member. A full-service writing center might use peer tutors, either paid or volunteer.

Honor students from any discipline might serve in lieu of a certain number of class hours. Another type of support might be to hire part-time instructors to supplement the writing center staff. Some writing centers could use outside experts (retired teachers, business communicators) on a full-time or part-time basis, or for consultants.

Those faculty members who wish to volunteer, but do not appear to be suited for tutoring might be involved in the center in other ways. They could develop training techniques and tools, recruit and train tutors, present workshops to tutors to acquaint the tutors with content and writing requirements in their classes on a regular basis in order to acquire knowledge to take back to the writing center and share with the other tutors.

Orientation Training (Conducted by writing center personnel: The director and experienced tutors)

Orientation training should be required only at the beginning of a volunteer tutor's first semester; it should be required for all tutors, regardless of the length of time the faculty tutor has spent in a regular classroom. Orientation could begin with a presentation of the center goals and philosophy. Special stress should be placed on the attitudes necessary to be a successful tutor. Next, tutors should be acquainted with the paperwork forms and procedures; in addition, they should be furnished with a list of supplemental student services, and the procedure for referring students to those services.

The remainder of the training session (or sessions) should be devoted to tutoring techniques. It might consist of some or all of the following strategies: a review of the writing process, a mini-lesson in study skills, an overview of computer or audiovisual programs available to the center, a taped tutoring session (followed by a discussion of special problems that might arise).

Refresher Sessions

Returning tutors should undergo brief refresher sessions each fall semester. These should be short group meetings which review the past semester, acquaint tutors with new materials, schedules, procedures, and any changes in personnel.

Ongoing Tutor-Training

Even though faculty volunteers have other tasks, there is a need for writing center personnel to keep in contact; this can be accomplished in regularly-scheduled staff workshops (informal). These could be weekly, monthly, or bimonthly. At these workshops, the tutors and director could present new ideas, discuss problems, successes and center needs. Participants could also review articles or books related to writing centers, the writing process, or tutoring techniques. Another item for discussion might be the varied writing assignments and requirements discovered by tutors who are sitting in different classes: lab reports, case studies, interviews.

In addition to regular staff workshops, special projects can be presented to other audiences to involve faculty tutors in the writing center activities:

1. Workshops. These can be developed and presented by tutors with the help and approval of the director. Relevant workshops might be presented in the writing center, in classroom, in faculty meetings, in school-associated meetings (PTA, advisory board), or in interested community groups such as senior citizen writing groups or organizations for teachers.

2. Public Relations. Announcements of the regular or special writing center activities can be sent to newspaper, radio, or television. A tutor could also design flyers and distribute them for publicity.

3. Clerical Duties. Tutors can update files and student records, catalog materials, or investigate new materials for center acquisition.

4. Software. A tutor with computer knowledge could write programs for the center or evaluate software already on the market.

5. Staff Writers' Workshop. Tutors and director could meet on an informal basis and critique each other's writing.

Recognition of Volunteer Faculty Tutors

Because most volunteers give from the heart and do not expect rewards, recognition for volunteer faculty is vital.

The number of hours served in the center should be acknowledged, as well as participation in special projects and the number of workshops attended. Student recognition, such as a contest for most outstanding faculty tutor, could also be a part of the recognition.

Certificates and articles in the school and community publications are probably the most common kind of awards, although there are many other possibilities. Faculty tutors could be honored at a board, PTA, or faculty meeting, or at a school-sponsored luncheon. They could be given a gift certificate for a free meal at a local restaurant, or flowers from an education-conscious florist. Some radio and TV stations now honor the teacher of the week; a special honor might be reserved for the faculty tutor.

Bonus materials also make nice awards: certificates from the campus or local bookstore, selections from a publisher's catalog, software, or even hardware, from cooperating computer companies. Another cherished and appropriate reward for writing center service would be registration and travel expenses to a conference, or tuition for a writing-related university course.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

Using volunteer faculty tutors can be an asset to a writing center, and can promote personal and prefessional growth for the involved faculty. But along with the benefits derived from this type or staffing, there are numerous pitfalls; however, many of the snags could be eliminated by careful preliminary planning by the administrators of the center. It is necessary to structure an efficient, well-organized volunteer system with a hierarchy, provide effective recruitment and training strategies, and offer tangible recognition for the participating faculty. Once the volunteer system is operating, support for the center is vital. Constant communication between administrator/director/tutors is valuable and leads to a smooth center operation where students, tutors, and institution receive maximum benefits. Volunteer faculty tutors can (and literally do) work!

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